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Ballade of a Street Door

Charles Williams

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'Two, darling,' said Marjorie, 'if you mean since you finished with me,'

'Four - no, six, since I finished the submarine,' her husband said. 'That wasn't bad, but I do better on land.'

'No.' Clarissa interrupted, 'it isn't so much that you do better, Jon, but one unconsciously expects the light effects in the sea and air and not so much in the earth. So it's more surprising, especially as it's not just translucent. It's – I don't know what it is.'

'The Je ne scais quoi,' said Jonathan. 'No, Clarissa. We had all that out in the last century but one. The French adored the Je ne scais quoi, and Hogarth laughed at them. He said it had become "the fashionable term for grace."'

'He was quite right,' Clarissa answered.

Jonathan shook his head at her. 'No, no, my girl,' he said severely; 'he didn't mean what you're trying to make him mean; he was talking art, not religion. Learn from another great man, who said: "I never travelled to heaven to gather new ideas."'

'No?' said Clarissa; 'where did he get them then? and who was he anyhow?'

'Sir Joshua himself,' Jonathan answered, '-and as for where he got them, he preferred "mere common observation and a plain understanding." So do I.'

Clarissa nodded at the painting. 'That?' she asked. 'Common observation?'

'Well, the more you paint the more you observe,' Jonathan allowed. 'I didn't once. That's why Marjorie's clothes haven't got it. But I'll do another of her and then we'll see.'

'What shall you call this one?' Clarissa asked.

Marjorie struck in. 'What he wanted to call it, Clarissa,' she said, 'was Marriage, quite simply Marriage. Till I pointed out that a wild stretch of rubble and a few shadows under the name of Marriage might give quite a lot of people the wrong idea. Jon always thinks that people who look at his pictures will first of all see whatever he wants them to see.'

'So they will – in fifty years,' Jonathan said. 'All the same, once it has got into their heads, it would be the best thing said about marriage in our generation. But perhaps a little literary?'

BALLADE OF A STREET DOOR
by Charles Williams

As I came up into the town
  Wherein my father's house abide,
I met a man in tattered gown,
  In ragged garment blowing wide,
  With terror fleet and open-eyed;
'Ho, whither now so fast, I pray?'
  Fearfully looked he back and cried:
'I pulled the bell and ran away!

'Good sir, if thou hast held renown
  Among this people, be my guide!
I from their welcome, not their frown,
  In shelter would obscurely hide.
  For when, being tired, a latch I tried,
Whence came a sound of revels gay,
  Fear rose within me like a tide, –
I pulled the bell and ran away.

'A voice called "Bring the festal crown!"
  And running footsteps gateward hied,
Wherethrough I heard, as they came down,
  Great names that challenged and replied,
  And torchlight through the chinks I spied:
My soul became a wild dismay,
  And as the doors began to slide
I pulled the bell and ran away!'

L'Envoi
Prince, was it you and I whose pride
  So turned, so fled, upon our Day?
Was it our voices then which sighed
  'I pulled the bell and ran away'?

'By the way,' said Clarissa, 'what mustn't I quote of Wordsworth?'

'Oh Clarissa,' exclaimed Marjorie, 'even I guessed that. "The light that never was.." I want him to call it "The light that always is.." Then no-one will make a mistake.'

'Literature again!' Jonathan grunted.

'My dear, I don't quite see why you're so down on literature,' Clarissa protested. 'I mean, both you and Wordsworth were talking of something that was either there or not there, weren't you? Don't you approve of me, say, learning to see?'

'Without stopping to point out,' Jonathan said gloomily, 'that in this case Wordsworth said it wasn't there, I may say that I do. It's very easy to borrow an impression, think it's yours, and plain understanding; that's the only way. From which I conclude that it's time for you to ring up the Colonel. There's the other phone, you know, if you want to be private.'

'No; this'll do, thank you,' Clarissa said. She lingered for a last glance at the painting, and then went across to the telephone, which was in a corner of the studio, and dialed Scotland Yard. Jonathan sat down by his wife and began to talk to her softly. Clarissa said presently: 'Scotland Yard.. Colonel Benton, please.. Miss Drayton... Colonel? Any news of the P.M.?'

The Colonel said: 'I don't understand this at all. The most unbelievable thing has happened.'

Clarissa said in a voice so clear and strong that it attracted the attention of her brother and his wife: 'Stop, Colonel.. Shall I tell you? shall I? Very well then. The body has disappeared.'

The others heard the Colonel's exclamation. 'Am I right?' Clarissa went on. 'I am.' She drew a deep breath and seemed to rest on the words. 'It's true then,' she murmured, almost to herself, 'it's true... No; I doubt if you could call it a guess; the whole thing was too suggestive. Tell me - just briefly; Inspector Challis is coming to the house with me to-night, and he might bring a copy of the report, if you'll be so kind. But meanwhile, what actually happened?'

'Dr. Grinley did the P.M.,' the Colonel said. 'He made a superficial examination with no results except (he says) an extraordinary appearance of flabbiness. After that, he made a medial incision, which means he began to cut open the body longways — Oh, I forgot you were a doctor! The moment the knife entered, before he had begun to cut, the body completely dissolved. There was a gush of air or gas or something, and all he had before him was a pool of some sort of fluid held together by a dusty scum. Of course, he collected what he could of it – I've seen it; it's unhealthy looking stuff – and it'll be analyzed. The poor girl must have had some extraordinary disease or other. Tropical perhaps.'

Clarissa said: 'You needn't be sympathetic, Colonel; there wasn't a poor girl. And if there was a disease, it won't be found by analysis. Dust and water is all you'll find, I think; the air's gone. There was very little fire. But I won't keep you now. You'll take care that the Inspector has the report? I'll come and see you to-morrow.'

'It's all most extraordinary,' the Colonel grumbled. 'I don't see how the case can go on. If there isn't a body here, and if there isn't any evidence in the house, we couldn't possibly prove murder.'

'I don't think there was a murder,' Clarissa said. 'But we'll talk of it to-morrow. Goodbye and thank you.' She put the receiver down and paused; then her eyes went to the painting and she stood looking at that. The others waited. Presently she sighed a little, as if from a full heart, and came across to them.

'Well...' she said. 'To me, at least. I make no comment.'

'Common observation and plain understanding,' he answered, almost as if pledging himself. 'I can't say less, though I don't like you to say more.'

Marjorie broke the pause that followed. She stood up. 'Tea, children,' she said. 'No, Jon, not in here. Come into the drawing-room.'

As they went, Clarissa said to her sister-in-law: 'Tell me, Marjorie, what do you think of them?'

'Of Jon's paintings?' Marjorie asked, making the tea. She was smaller than the Draytons, fairer, and more supple, and now as she considered the question, she seemed to set herself to translate something into a medium to which she was not very used. 'I think they're extremely beautiful,' she went on. 'He hasn't got my ears very well, but he admits that. And sometimes he can be tiresome about putting bits in.'

'Yes,' said Clarissa, 'but the painting -- this light of his?'

MLT